

LIFE AND LABOR



Lincoln 35

FEBRUARY, 1921

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Pilgrim's Progress in a Telephone Exchange

The Pilgrim

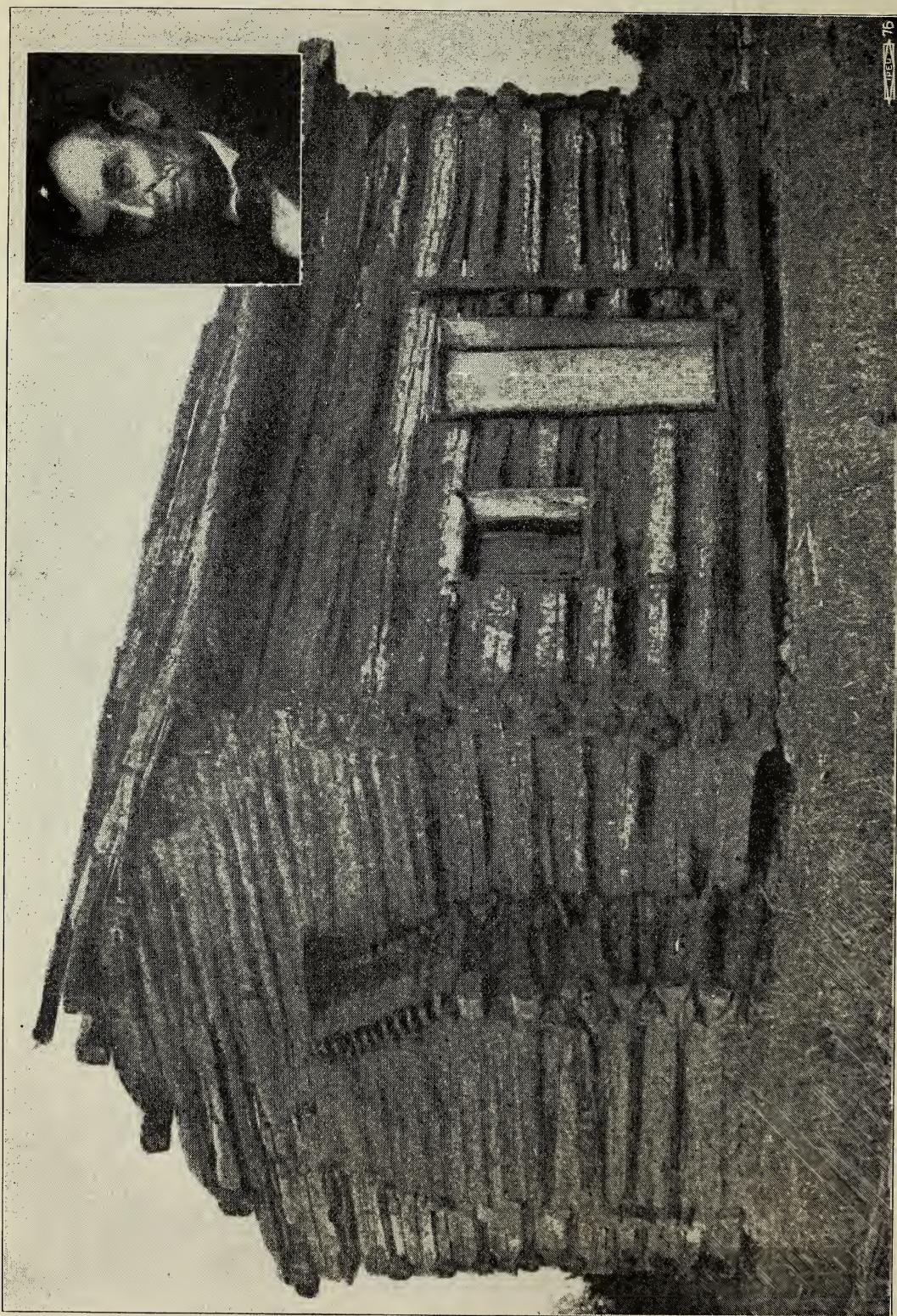
Our Voting Women: Will They Make Good?

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Birthplace of Abraham Lincoln at Hodgenville, Kentucky. Portrait, a Reproduction of a Painting by Jacques Reich.



Life and Labor

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FEBRUARY, 1921

Lincoln and Labor

By William E. Barton

A CONSIDERATION of the attitude of Abraham Lincoln toward labor requires us to remember, first of all, that he lived and died before the present day industrial system had come into existence. Several people who have wanted to quote him on labor have forgotten this, and have attributed to Lincoln statements which cannot be found in his published works and which are the outgrowth of conditions which came into being after he was dead. For instance, a widely quoted statement concerning the threatened rise of great corporations, is known to have originated with another man in 1873; but it is quoted as from the pen of Lincoln.

Another popular quotation is this:

"I am glad that a system of labor prevails under which laborers can strike when they want to, where they are not obliged to work under all circumstances, and are not tied down to work whether you pay them for it or not. I like a system that lets a man quit when he wants to, and I wish it might prevail everywhere. I want a man to have a chance to better his condition; that is the true system. I am not ashamed to confess that twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer."

This quotation cannot be called strictly accurate. It is a garbled combination of two widely separated statements, each of which is worthy of some study.

The last sentence is the more readily located. The statement "Twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer," was written, apparently, about a quarter century after he ceased to work with his hands for other men.

With this clue, we have not far to go. We find the document on which this appears to be based. It is a fragment which he prepared on July 1, 1854. Whether

he delivered it as an address we do not know; but he probably did. It certainly served as the basis of subsequent addresses. The fragment in full can be found in any of the editions of his works:

"Equality in society alike beats inequality, whether the latter be of the British aristocratic sort, or of the domestic slavery sort. We know Southern men declare that their slaves are better off than hired laborers amongst us. How little they know whereof they speak! There is no permanent class of hired laborers amongst us. Twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer. The hired laborer of yesterday labors on his own account today, and will hire the labor of others tomorrow. Advancement—improvement in condition—is the order of things in a society of equals. As labor is the common burden of our race, so the effort of some to shift their share of the burden onto the shoulders of others is the great durable curse of the race. Originally a curse for the transgression upon the whole race, when, as by slavery, it is concentrated on a part only, it becomes the double-refined curse of God upon his creatures.

"Free labor has the inspiration of hope; pure slavery has no hope. The power of hope upon human exertion and happiness is wonderful. The slave-master himself has a conception of it, and hence the system of tasks among slaves. The slave whom you cannot drive with the lash to break seventy-five pounds of hemp in a day, if you will task him with a hundred, and promise him pay for all he does over, he will break you a hundred and fifty. You have substituted hope for the rod. And yet perhaps it does not occur to you that to the extent of your gain in the case, you have given up the slave system and adopted the free system of labor."

A study of this statement in the light of its context shows:

1. Lincoln was not contrasting capital and labor; and did not recognize the distinction between the capitalist and the la-

borer; he denied that America has, or then had, a permanent class of hired laborers. The hired laborer and the capitalist were to Lincoln the same man, in different steps of his career.

2. Lincoln was discussing, not the system of modern industry, but the system of negro slavery in its economic aspects and contrasting it with free labor.

3. He was not defending the right of the laborer to quit any more than he was defending or denying the right of the employer to quit hiring him; that right of either side was not challenged in Lincoln's day. The question of collective bargaining was not under discussion by Lincoln.

4. When Lincoln talked of the right of the working man to better his condition, as he did, he did not have in mind the strike as the working man's instrument, but was commanding work and economy such that the working man might hope to rise out of the condition of a hired laborer into that of a man laboring for himself, and possibly employing others.

AN EQUAL CHANCE FOR ALL, BLACK AS WELL AS WHITE

The other statement is less easy to locate. Lincoln lived so remote from a sphere of strikes, and his approach to the labor question was from so different an angle than that of the modern student of industrial conditions, it is not easy to think, at first, where he would have been likely to say such words as those attributed to him. He said them, or words much like them, in New Haven, Connecticut, on March 6, 1860, two months before his nomination for the Presidency. He disclaimed much knowledge of strikes and of the industrial conditions out of which they grew, but replied to the argument that the strike which he found to be on in New England among the employees in the shoe factories of Lynn, Massachusetts, was the result of business conditions attributable to fear of a Republican victory. This charge Douglas and other Democrats had made, and Lincoln replied:

"Another specimen of this bushwhacking—that 'shoe-strike.' Now be it understood that I do not pretend to know all about the matter. I am merely going to speculate a little about some of its phases, and at the outset I am glad to see that a system prevails in New England under which laborers can strike if they want to, where they are not

obliged to work under all circumstances, and are not tied down and obliged to labor whether you pay them for it or not. I like the system that lets a man quit when he wants to, and wish it might prevail everywhere. One of the reasons I am opposed to slavery is just here. What is the true condition of the laborer? I take it that it is best for all to leave each man free to acquire property as fast as he can. Some will get wealthy. I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good. So while we do not propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else. When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition; he knows there is no fixed condition of labor for his whole life. I am not ashamed to confess that twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flatboat—just what might happen to any poor man's son. I want every man to have the chance—and I believe a black man is entitled to it—in which he can better his condition—when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year, and the next work for himself, and finally hire men to work for him. That is the true system."

When Lincoln expressed sympathy with the strike, confessing that he did not know about it, the first fact of notice is that his sympathies were immediately with the workmen. He suggested that they stop working in factories, and go out to the farms, and become independent. He believed that factory life was a life less free than life in the open, and he hoped that the workmen who found the conditions of labor hard in factories would move from New England to Illinois. He said so in that same address. But his main point still was his contrast of free labor and slave labor, and he made the point, that the white free laborer could stop working for the man who does not pay him what his work is worth, and the black slave could not do so; and Lincoln wished that the condition in which a man might stop working if he was not paid might prevail everywhere, meaning specifically, in the states where there was slave labor.

I find only one other reference in all of Lincoln's writings or speeches to a strike. It is in a note marked "Private" and sent to Secretary Stanton on December 21, 1863. He said:

"Sending a note to the Secretary of the Navy, as I promised, he called over and said that the strikes in the shipyards had thrown the completion of vessels back so much that he thought General Gilmore's proposition entirely proper."

What General Gilmore's proposition was, I do not know; but evidently some cherished plan of the Navy Department had to be abandoned or modified because at that critical period, when the effort to keep England and France from recognizing the Confederacy depended upon ships, supposedly loyal men working in the ship-yards went on strike. I should like to know whether Lincoln would have said that under those conditions he still wished men everywhere might feel free to strike. I have the impression he would have said it was their economic right to strike and their patriotic duty not to do so; but I will not attempt to put words into his mouth.

LABORER A POTENTIAL CAPITALIST

Lincoln carefully wrought out one deliverance on labor, and one which satisfied him permanently; and it is good reading both for the laborer and for the capitalist. In it he starts with the same assumption, that the laborer is a potential capitalist, and that labor is itself the creator of capital; but he does not stop there. He believed that in a country whose resources were as large as they were and are in America, the laborer, if wise, could keep himself independent of capital more easily than the capitalist could make himself independent of labor. He noted the beginnings of a cleavage between labor and capital, and he found his sympathies on the side of labor. What he said on that subject he said to the nation and to the world. The paragraphs in which he enunciated most completely his views on labor are in one of his most carefully prepared papers, and one which before delivery he submitted to the reading of men in whose opinions he had most confidence: for he did not feel that on that occasion he could afford to say anything that would not bear the most careful scrutiny of the whole nation, North and South, and of other nations as well. Lincoln said:

"Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior

of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration. Capital has its rights, which are as worthy of protection as any other rights. Nor is it denied that there is, and probably always will be, a relation between labor and capital producing mutual benefits. The error is in assuming that the whole labor of the community exists within that relation. A few men own capital, and that few avoid labor themselves, and with their capital, hire or buy another few to labor for them. A large majority belong to neither class—neither work for others nor have others working for them. In most of the Southern states, a large majority of the whole people, of all colors, are neither slaves nor masters; while in the Northern, a large majority are neither hirers nor hired."

This is from Lincoln's First Annual Address to Congress, December 3, 1861. It is his most careful utterance on the subject. His sympathy as between labor and capital was with labor; but he did not admit a natural antagonism, for he felt and had his experience to prove, that a young man with character and ambition and skill should not look forward to being, in America, permanently in the class of those who are hired.

We find this same point of view in all of Lincoln's discussions of labor. He began with a consideration of the difference between slave and free labor, and went on to a denial that to free labor in America there was any necessary permanent relation of subjection to capital. This he set forth in his speech in Cincinnati, September 17, 1859, where his treatment of the theme appears to have grown directly out of his discussions with Douglas, in his debates with whom the matter had risen only incidentally:

"Some people assume that there is a necessary connection between capital and labor, and that connection has within it the whole of the labor of the community. They assume that nobody works unless capital excites them to work. . . . I say the whole thing is a mistake. . . . That relation does not embrace more than one-eighth of the labor of the country."

In another address he considered unnecessary transportation as a waste of labor, and used his illustrations to en-



William E. Barton

courage home industries. In another he considered a depreciated currency as a wrong to labor. In his Second Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862, he considered the effect upon free white labor of free negro labor, and declared that he believed that instead of depreciating the value of free white labor, the freedom of the slave would tend to increase it.

In his Third Annual Message, dated December 8, 1863, he considered the labor shortage produced by the war, and advised Congress to encourage immigration, for:

"It is easy to see that, under the sharp discipline of civil war, the nation is beginning a new life."

In that same message he considered the possibility that the new freedom of the slaves might involve some complications, on account of the resentment and fear of white labor in the states where there was a sudden competition of free black labor, but this he counted temporary, and to be charged to the evil of slavery, and not to any inherent hostility between labor and capital:

"The proposed acquiescence of the national executive in any reasonable temporary State arrangement for the freed people is made with the view of possibly modifying the confusion and destitution which must at best attend all classes by a total revolution of labor throughout whole States."

On March 21, 1864, he received a committee from the Workingmen's Association of New York, and in reply to their address he quoted in full what he had said to Congress in 1861, and added:

"The views then expressed remain unchanged, nor have I much to add. None are so deeply interested to resist the present rebellion as the working people. Let them beware of prejudice, working division and hostility among themselves. The most notable feature of a disturbance in your city last summer was the hanging of some working people by other working people. It should never be so. The strongest bond of human sympathy, outside the family relation, should be one uniting all working people, of all nations, and tongues and kindreds. Nor should this lead to a war upon property, or the owners of property. Property is the fruit of labor; property is desirable; is a positive good in the world. That some should be rich shows that others may become rich, and hence is just encouragement to industry and enterprise. Let not him who

is houseless pull down the house of another, but let him work diligently and build one for himself, thus by example assuring that his own shall be safe from violence when built."

These were the most direct of all words ever uttered by Lincoln on the issue, then rising, of hostility between labor and capital, and they were his final words on this theme.

In his Fourth Annual Message to Congress, dated December 6, 1864, he spoke of the very high cost of labor, particularly as it affected the building of the transcontinental railways; but he did not go into the matter at length, merely congratulating the country that notwithstanding this added element of difficulty, the work was making progress.

WEALTH PRODUCED BELONGS TO MEN WHO PRODUCE IT

One of the most striking of Lincoln's statements on labor was probably never published during his lifetime, but appears to have been used by him more than once in more or less formal addresses. It exists, like the 1854 document, in the form of notes. The notes on this topic were in a discussion of the tariff. They appear to have been made in 1847. The notes cover several pages, and seem to have been his own attempt to define to himself the underlying principles of tariff legislation. In the midst of the notes, I find this paragraph:

"In the early days of our race the Almighty said to the first of our race, 'In the sweat of the face shalt thou eat bread'; and since then, if we except the light and air from heaven, no good thing has been or can be enjoyed by us without having first cost labor. And inasmuch as most good things are produced by labor, it follows that all such things of right belong to those whose labor has produced them. But it has so happened, in all ages of the world, that some have labored, and others without labor enjoyed a large proportion of the fruits. This is wrong, and should not continue. To secure to each laborer the whole product of his labor, or as nearly as possible, is a worthy object of any good government."

He went on to a discussion of the means of eliminating unnecessary labor and idleness, and dwelt, as he did at other times, on the waste of useless transportation; and then returned to a consideration of the tariff. The foregoing paragraph is to be interpreted in the light of its context. It was the tariff question which Lincoln was

just then considering, and the labor question came into it incidentally. Nevertheless, this is a striking paragraph, and shows how deep was his sympathy with the men who labor, and how clear his conviction that as labor produced wealth, the wealth produced belongs to the men who produce it.

One thing I think ought to be noted, which is that the laboring men of England recognized in Lincoln a friend of labor. The Civil War wrought great hardships in the cotton mills of England, and England's temptation to recognize the Confederacy was strong. Henry Ward Beecher went to England and pleaded with the working men, who were at first very unwilling to hear him. His message was in effect what Lowell had said in his Bigelow Papers:

"Laborin' man and laborin' woman
Has one glory and one shame;
Everything that's done inhuman
Injures all on 'em the same."

The fight of the North for a free nation was stated strongly as a reason why England should suffer economic loss, if necessary, rather than support a moral wrong. It brought great joy to Lincoln when the cotton operatives of Lancashire, to the number of 6,000, at a meeting in Manchester, on New Year's Eve, in 1862, urged Lincoln to abolish slavery, and refused to petition Her Majesty's Government to recognize the cause of the South. On January 19, 1863, Lincoln replied to the Manchester working men in a letter which displayed sincere gratification.

ELECTED HONORARY MEMBER BY WORKING-MEN'S ASSOCIATION

In March, 1864, the Workingmen's Association of New York City made him an honorary member, following the lead of a convention of trade unionists who, assembled in Philadelphia as early as 1861, pledged Lincoln their support and urged the abolition of slavery. These evidences of the appreciation of working men, Lincoln, himself a working man, received with genuine interest and appreciation.

The main lines of Lincoln's views on labor appear to have been laid down in his notes in 1854, developed in his Cincinnati speech of September 17, 1859, and enlarged upon in an address not quite two weeks later before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society in Milwaukee. They are the

same that he wrought into his First Annual Message to Congress, and to which he referred near the end of his life, in his letter to the New York working men as the views which he still held and to which he could add little.

These are the important authentic utterances of Lincoln on labor and are consistent throughout. As he defined his views they are virtually these:

Free labor is better, more righteous and more remunerative than slave labor. Labor is prior to capital and superior to it; but there is no inevitable antagonism between them, nor any unalterable division of men in America into permanent classes as capitalists or laborers. The laborer has a right to aspire to be a capitalist, and should act toward capital as he will wish laborers to act toward him when he becomes a capitalist. But man is not a commodity; the rights of labor, while giving it no privilege to destroy capital, are more sacred than the rights which inhere in capital: for capital is the fruit of labor.

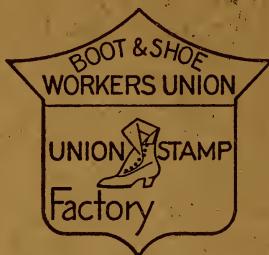
As a laboring man, Lincoln was a friend of labor. As a man who had risen out of a condition of hard labor, he believed in ambition and aspiration for the laboring man. He believed in freedom because freedom is the mother of hope, and he wanted the privilege of hope preserved to all honest labor.

New Committee of National League

The National League has broken into the "solid South" with a live organization of trade union women. The Birmingham, Alabama, Committee, formed January 6, has started on its career of service with high hopes of constructive accomplishment and with the fine enthusiasm of earnest, high-hearted women of vision, determined to transmute that vision into reality. The Committee has as its chairman Mrs. D. S. Litton, a lifelong worker in the interests of organization, and now treasurer of the Birmingham Trades Council. The secretary, Miss Mollie Dowd, is also state chairman of the Committee on the Woman in Industry, for the Alabama League of Women Voters. Miss Mary Caden is vice-chairman, and Mrs. J. R. Still, treasurer. The Committee has already begun its activities, and plans to meet monthly.

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